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ABSTRACT

The prime purpose of this document on Alberta, Canada's project SEARCH (Selection of Educational Alternatives for Rural Change) was that of acquainting the interested reader with the project. The SEARCH program, which evolved through the felt need to improve rural education, had 2 major objectives: to select and field test promising innovations and to mobilize school and community resources in order to expand potential opportunities for rural schools. Based upon the premise that change comes from within the approach of project SEARCH was through community involvement at the "grass roots" level. Some of the problems encountered were lack of support from necessary individuals, insufficient time to participate on the part of teachers and administrators, and the obstacles inherent in a program of research and development. No specific conclusions were given since the prime purpose of the document was that of projecting awareness of the status of the project to interested parties. A bibliography is included. (AL)

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Project SEARCH: Purposes and Problems

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

The efficacy of the small rural high school has been, and is being, brought into question. Such schools have been described as being "sub-minimal" and "less than complete".[1] Isenberg has charged that rural schools, "...are not doing nearly well enough to assure rural youth a very bright future."[2] The Alberta Special Committee of the Legislative Assembly on School Centralization observed that such schools force "...all students through the same mold [matriculation program], regardless of the students' ability or aptitude... To all intents and purposes, the non-matriculant is overlooked or given only limited attention to his education."[3] The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory maintains that:

> Rural adults and youth are the product of an educational system that has historically short changed rural people. The extent to which rural people have been denied equality of educational opportunity is evident from both the products of the educational system and the resources that go into the system. On both counts, the quality of rural education ranks low.[4]

While much has been written as to the nature of the problems facing small rural high schools, few alternatives have been proposed to ameliorate

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[1]L. W. Downey, The Small High School in Alberta. Edmonton:Alberta School Trustees Association, 1965. p 58.

[2]R. M. Isenberg, National Outlook Conference on Rural Youth: General Session Part 1. Washington: Department of Agriculture, 1967. p 34.

[3]D. A. MacKay, "Excerpts from School Centralization Report", The CSA Bulletin. VI:5 June 1967. p 62.

[4]Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Small School Program. Portland: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1968. p 4.

these problems. Indeed, other than the move to centralize schools, one can count but a handful of activities addressing themselves to these problems, and these are primarily in the United States.[5]

II. OBJECTIVES

In September, 1969, the Alberta Human Resources Research Council, in co-operation with a central Alberta County, undertook to develop ways and means of expanding the educational opportunities available to the youth attending small rural high schools. The vehicle for developing various alternatives which could achieve this purpose is known as Project SEARCH, which is an acronym for the Selection of Educational Alternatives for Rural Change.

Other than the overall purpose alluded to above, what specifically, is Project SEARCH attempting to do? Two objectives, in particular, are noteworthy. First, attempts will be made to select or develop and field test a number of innovations which appear to offer some promise of increasing opportunities. The second objective, but perhaps the more significant, is that of attempting to mobilize the resources of the school and community so as to effect an expansion of opportunities. SEARCH contends that the community possesses resources which can be beneficial to its youth, provided that these resources are utilized effectively. SEARCH also contends that the activities of the community and its school should be integrated so as to achieve optimal satisfaction of the needs and aspirations of the community's youth. Thus, SEARCH maintains that the community can and should

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[5]Two projects in particular are noteworthy -- The Western States Small Schools Project and the Small Schools Program. Information on the former may be obtained from the Coordinator, WSSSP, Carson City, Nevada. The Small Schools Program is under the sponsorship of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland, Oregon.

have a meaningful impact on the school, and that the school and community should complement each other for the benefit of the youth.

III. AN APPROACH

SEARCH has predicated its activities upon two premises. First, it is assumed that change will be accepted more readily if those involved in and affected by change in educational programs play a central role in deciding upon what changes will be made in the program. This assumption should not be construed to mean that everyone who will come into contact with the innovation should participate in every decision that goes into the development of the innovation. Rather, participation in decision-making will occur at various stages in the development of the innovation. For example, the decision to proceed beyond the preliminary design stage of a particular innovation would be taken by the teachers directly affected by the innovation, while the decision to implement the innovation could also involve the school administration.

SEARCH has also adopted the premise that change generated and funded solely by external agents will not be as enduring as change generated and funded by those who will be affected by the change.

Polemeni, in a study of the status of Title III projects, after funding by the United States Government was withdrawn, found that of 149 projects, "...80.5 percent died immediately following the termination of Title III funds..."[6]; while only 16.1 percent of the projects continued in operation for more than one year. Polemeni argues that external funding

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[6]A. J. Polemeni, "A Study of the Status of Title III Projects" Phi Delta Kappan. LI:1 (September 1969) p 41.

agencies should not become discouraged by this death rate - to the point of withdrawing funds - but should insist that such projects be initiated only when (1) a financial commitment has been obtained from the local agency, and (2) the project has been deemed economically feasible so that the area can support it after external funds have been withdrawn. He also contends that continuance after withdrawal of funds is more probable when, "...local districts and agencies...make a greater commitment of personnel and...foster greater community participation..."[7] (Underlining mine)

Polemeni's observations, as well as those of others, indicate that innovative projects in education tend to fade away into the educational graveyard if they are not economically feasible for the target system and if there is not a high degree of participation in and commitment to the change by those affected by the change.

While economic feasibility and commitment play large roles in determining the endurance of the change after external agents have withdrawn, they do not necessarily determine the endurance of change-oriented behavior. SEARCH contends, therefore, that the external agents should focus on the process of change rather than the product of change. To this end, efforts should focus on developing within individuals the capability to continually adapt to a changing environment. It is presumed that a working knowledge of problem-solving skills and group process skills will contribute to such a capability.

How then, has SEARCH gone about the task of accomplishing the objectives that were set out? The key to accomplishment appeared to lie in creating opportunities for "grass roots" participation, after which training

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[7]Ibid. p 43.

in planning and implementing change would be undertaken. Thus, SEARCH was initiated into the field by first seeking out support from students, parents, elected officials, and school administrators, located in two communities in the County. The support requested was for two types of resources - human and financial. With regard to financial support, an agreement was reached between the County and HRRC in November, 1969, which provided $6000 for the implementation of practices which would reduce the teacher workload, thus freeing teachers for participation (refer to Problem of Time).

While the first attempts to obtain individuals willing to participate began in April, 1969, major activity in this regard commenced in September, 1969. These activities had as their major objective, the creation of educational interest groups, composed of educational leaders and interested citizens, in two communities located in the County.

The need to involve interested citizens as well as the formal leaders in an activity such as SEARCH is pointed out in numerous studies of community decision-making structures. Knill, in a study of an Oregon community, found that 80 percent of his respondents expressed an interest in local school affairs but were unaware of the means by which this interest could be expressed in the community.[8] Matthews, in a study of an urban school district in Alberta, found that school board members developed attitudes toward educational issues through limited contacts in the community. In order of importance, these contacts were:

1. their school-attending children;

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[8]W. D. Knill, "Who Censure the Public Schools", Oregon School Study Bulletin. 4:9 (March, 1961) p 9.

2. individuals who were in some way involved in school issues in the community; and
3. influentials in the community accorded political status or having political power.[9]

Goldhammer found in his study of Central Forks that:

> "School board members had very limited contacts within the community, being anchored in the interests, values, and perspectives of groups in which their own social concepts, orientations, and objectives provided a common acceptance.[10]

St. James study of eighty-one urban school boards in Canada sought to determine the board's perception of the influence various groups had in the formulation of board policy. She found:

1. The professional education groups participated to the greatest extent. Their pattern of participation was strong over all the issue areas except financing and expenditure. They were the most influential participants.
2. Education-oriented groups were the next most frequent participants, primarily in the area of the instructional program.
3. Business groups ranked third in participation and influence, with a strong pattern of participation in financing and expenditures.[11]

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[9]N. O. Matthews, "A Study of the Decision-Making Process of Two School Boards in an Alberta Community", Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. University of Alberta, 1967. pp 296-697.

[10]K. Goldhammer, "Community Power Structure and School Board Membership", American School Board Journal, 130 (March 1955), p 25.

[11]A. M. St. James, "An Investigation of Participation by Community Groups in the Decision-Making Process in Elected, Partly-Elected, and Appointed School Boards." Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1966, pp 168-169.

Clearly, then, restricting participation to educational leaders did not assure SEARCH of having the broadest possible range of ideas and interests in its activities. To obtain this wider representation in SEARCH activities, "town hall" meetings were called, meetings were held with small groups of people, and an attempt was made during a community survey to identify individuals interested in the educational affairs of the community.

From this activity, two groups came into existence in each community and were named the School Task Force and the Community Task Force.

The School Task Forces (S.T.F.) evolved from a series of meetings with the teaching staffs of each school. SEARCH suggested to the staffs that the S.T.F. be composed of teachers, students, and school and central office administrators, with a maximum membership of 12. The suggested terms of reference for the S.T.F. were:

1. To analyze existing educational programs and opportunities within the school.
2. To consider ways and means of improving and expanding educational programs and opportunities within the school.
3. To make recommendations for change to the school staff and/or school system.
4. To act in an advisory capacity to the Community Task Force.

The first activity directed towards the creation of the Community Task Forces (C.T.F.) was a "town hall" meeting in each community. From these meetings Interim Steering Committees of six to eight volunteers were established. The Steering Committee's task was to advise SEARCH of ways and means of establishing a C.T.F. in each community. Suggested C.T.F. membership was much like that of the S.T.F. with the majority of members,

however, being individuals not working in the formal school setting. The suggested terms of reference for the C.T.F. were similar to those of the S.T.F. with the primary emphasis being placed on educational opportunities available in the community rather than those in the school.

By late January, 1970, membership on the S.T.F.'s and C.T.F.'s had been determined, and the task forces had agreed to participate in SEARCH activities.

Figure 1 depicts the organizational schema for Project SEARCH activities as of January, 1970.

One final note as to the nature of Project SEARCH should provide a perspective from which it can be viewed. SEARCH can be denoted as an exercise in Research and Development. R and D programs are two-pronged in that they seek to generate new knowledge and to apply this knowledge to particular situations. Thus, SEARCH proposes to study the processes and products that are generated by the task forces and return the findings to the task forces so that they might be able to make the necessary application.

IV. PROBLEMS

It might be useful at this time to point out some of the problems that were encountered, and the tentative solutions that were advanced, as SEARCH sought to create and operationalize the S.T.F.'s and C.T.F.'s.

1. The Problem of Support from Individuals

As is evident from the preceding discussion, it was imperative that there be obtained from a number of individuals an expression of willingness to participate. As indicated earlier, a number of techniques were used to identify those individuals who either held a position of leadership in the educational affairs of the

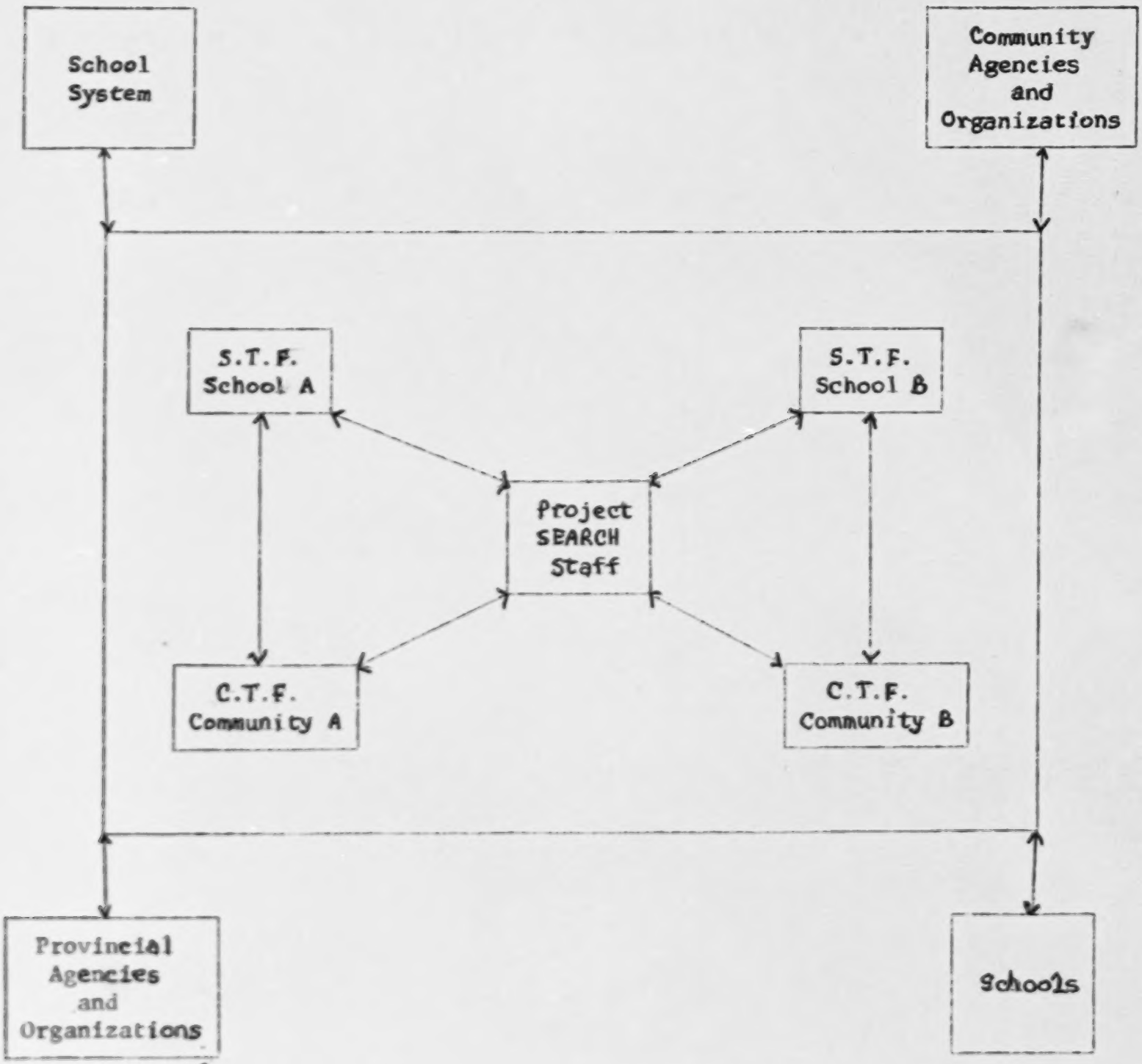

Figure 1: Project SEARCH: Participants and Their Relationships

community or who expressed an interest in education; the assumption being that they would be willing to participate in an endeavour aimed at improving their educational programs.

While the procedures might have been sound research practices, they were not complete, for there had been overlooked one crucial factor in initiating a project such as SEARCH. In a change-oriented endeavour, the prospective participants must want to change - there must be some unsatisfied needs. While there was some dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs, many individuals felt that proposed remedies had either been blocked in the past or were economically or socially or politically unfeasible.

A second major obstacle to obtaining individual support was symbolized in such expressions as : "What do we know about education?" and "What good can we do when decisions are being made in the Provincial legislature and County council chambers?" Thus, while individuals may have felt a great deal of personal efficacy within their community, they were not certain that their voices would be heard by the "decision-makers".

A third obstacle, and perhaps the most significant, was the matter of trust. As the individual encounters something new to his environment, he tests it, constantly seeking to determine the contribution it can make to needs-fulfillment. SEARCH staff were strangers in the schools and communities and were to be accepted only with extreme caution.

A fourth obstacle was SEARCH's position that those affected by a change must be involved in deciding upon the proposed change that will be made. To say the least, SEARCH staff encountered widespread

skepticism - even total disagreement with this position. Those who were skeptical constantly tested SEARCH staff in an attempt to identify the "hidden agenda". Those who disagreed with the position argued that SEARCH staff were experts in this realm; consequently, there was little need for asking the people what needed to be done.

How were these obstacles overcome? The first task of SEARCH staff in moving towards the amelioration of the obstacles was the initiation of a perception check which would: (1) obtain from individuals a statement of their perceptions; and (2) identify the perceptions of one individual for another. To this end, meetings were tape recorded and records made of all field activities for later transcription and analysis. From these records, SEARCH staff were able to identify four components of support. These were need, investment, payoff, and risk.[12] That is, an individual's willingness to support an activity is based on his perception of the need for the activity; the investment that will be required of him; the payoff or rewards that will accrue to him; and the personal risk entailed in supporting the activity. An individual's willingness to support an activity is also based on his perception of how others have perceived these four components.

For example, the term investment carries many connotations. While the teachers saw themselves making a tremendous investment in time and work, the County councillors saw themselves as having to make a

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[12]This conceptualization resulted from the work of Dr. W. G. Roberts, Project Head.

tremendous financial investment. Neither group, however, appeared to have placed much emphasis on the perceptions of the other in determining their own perception. Thus, the councillors saw a high risk for themselves for different reasons than did the teachers.

The "perception check" then, attempted to reveal the perceptions of prospective participants so that all would be made aware of the basis upon which individuals decided to support or not support the Project.

2. The Problem of Time

The matter of obtaining time to participate in SEARCH activities, while a major obstacle to obtaining individual support, is being treated separately because of the strategy used in overcoming the problem.

The problem was most acute at the teacher level. An examination of staff characteristics and workloads quickly reveals the components of the problem.

Both schools had experienced a high staff turnover (approximately 50 percent) since the last school year. In addition, several of the new staff were entering into their first year of teaching, with several of the remainder entering into their second year. One of the schools had also acquired a new principal and vice-principal. To further complicate the problem, several of the new teachers were given a workload which might best be described as highly diversified.

In early November, SEARCH and the County agreed to the establishment of a Trust Fund for each of the Project schools, the purpose of which was to provide the S.T.F.'s with financial resources which could be applied to

the reduction of staff workloads. To this end, SEARCH and the County each contributed $1500 to each of the schools, with the prerogative to authorizing disbursements residing with the S.T.F.'s.

The questions that beg to be answered are, did the Trust Funds assist in the resolution of the problem of time and, if so, to what extent? While it is too early to provide definite answers to the questions, one would be on reasonably safe ground if his answers did not accentuate the positive. What is clear, however, is that the Trust Funds contributed to, or created, other problems.

The Trust Fund played some part in the decision of one school to opt out of the Project for a two-month period. Essentially, a number of members on one S.T.F. took the position that workload reduction alternatives were not feasible in the middle of a school term; hence, any participation would have to occur during their free time. These members advocated a system of financial remuneration as compensation for usurping their free time. SEARCH's stance was that honoraria for participation was not a legitimate charge on the Trust Fund. An impasse developed and progress in the direction of SEARCH's objectives was not readily discernable. Frustration on this issue served only to compound the problem of obtaining time for participation, and the S.T.F. chose to call a halt to their activity.

3. The Problem of R and D

Those engaged in R and D projects are necessarily concerned with the achievement of two objectives which are relatively discrete but not readily susceptible to rank-ordering. In the case of SEARCH, attempts are being made to study groups as they go about the task of initiating change and, at the same time, to help groups initiate change.

To accomplish the first objective -- that of studying the groups -- requires that SEARCH staff refrain from participating in an activity in a manner which might be construed as biasing the direction of the group. For example, if the group was to adopt as a fundamental position that only those members who pay property taxes could vote on an issue, then as researchers, SEARCH staff could not engage in any activity designed to modify the group's stance. The task, rather, would merely be one of studying the ramifications of the position on the group over a period of time.

To accomplish the second objective, however, requires that participation in group activities be promotive and supportive of the group's objectives. That is, the group must perceive the participation as being in the best interests of that particular group. If for a moment the groups suspects that the participation was brought forward on the basis that it was in the primary interest of another group, attempts at assistance are likely to enjoy only limited success. Thus, to accomplish the objective of helping the groups to achieve <u>their</u> objective, SEARCH staff, while working in the group, must relegate the research component of their role to a subservient position.

R and D work, then, requires that there be a "tradeoff" between the rigor and control requisite to research and the lack of external direction requisite to development. Such trading-off often results in a contamination of both components. While SEARCH has not been able to strike a balance between the two, it would appear that the research component will assume an increasingly subordinate position to the development component.

V. SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper has been to acquaint interested parties with Project SEARCH. It was felt that the acquaintanceship might best be struck through an iteration of objectives and major problem areas. While it is too early to determine to what extent SEARCH's objectives are being met, the task forces have reiterated their commitment to the objectives and their willingness to "push ahead".

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